

A Thousand Days and 30 Years

From Man to Martyr to Myth



The Charm And the Power:

John F. Kennedy in
the Oval Office, 1961.

Paul Schutzer/Life Magazine, courtesy Time Warner

By TOM WICKER

THIRTY years after John Fitzgerald Kennedy's murder in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Americans continue to hold the 35th President in improbably high regard — not just as a man of star quality, whose life was cut short in a moment whose origins are still debated, but as a national leader ranked in some polls with or above Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Yet John Kennedy's "Thousand Days" in the Presidency were marked less by historic achievements than by continual crises — the Bay of Pigs fiasco; Berlin; the world's first nuclear confrontation; the beginnings of the war in Vietnam; the heated collisions of white authority and black civil rights demonstrators in the Southern states. Nor were Kennedy's responses always sure.

In his last months in office, for example, he concluded the first nuclear test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union. But in his early months he had ordered a massive military buildup that contributed heavily to the Soviet-American arms race. He was reluctant to expend political capital on behalf of black demonstrators, whose persistence made him impatient, and was forced mostly by events into his clashes with Southern recalcitrants like Governors George Wallace of Alabama and Ross Barnett of Mississippi.

The overall record of his Presidency, though in many respects admirable, hardly accounts for Kennedy's high standing three decades later — a standing all the more unlikely because the years since his death have seen continuing assaults on his personal and political reputations.

His dalliances with women before and during his White House years have become public knowledge. Books like "A

Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy" by Thomas C. Reeves and Nigel Hamilton's "J.F.K.: Reckless Youth" have pictured him as privileged, pampered, often irresponsible and insensitive. Inadequately answered charges persist that he and his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, repeatedly sought the assassination of Fidel Castro. The author Richard Reeves makes it clear in "President Kennedy: Profile in Power" that Kennedy consistently deceived the public about his health, enduring almost constant pain and sometimes resorting to "feel good" injections during his campaign and Presidency.

Changes in Atmosphere

The nation's political and social atmospheres, moreover, have changed greatly since John Kennedy's time. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 signaled a national embrace of conservatism after decades of the New Deal liberalism that Kennedy was mistakenly believed to exemplify (his party, save its Southerners, was further to the left than he wanted to be). And the growth of the urban underclass, with the rising incidence of urban crime, has chilled attitudes toward black Americans, with whose improved status the 35th President is indelibly linked.

All this, or less, would have dulled the public's regard for any other former President. How has John F. Kennedy, while not exactly a candidate for Mount Rushmore, prevailed over predictable eclipse? The most important reason, undoubtedly, is the almost mythic manner of his death.

The hero cut down at the height of his glory (though Kennedy was in something of a political slump in the fall of

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In Death, J.F.K. Continues to Loom Larger Than Life



The speeding limousine, Lyndon B. Johnson's swearing-in, and the funeral procession were images of the assassination imbedded in the consciousness of Americans who lived through those long days.

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1963) is a staple of legend-making. And when such a fate befalls a figure of youth and beauty, the legend becomes even more of a romantic drama — heightened, in Kennedy's case, by the mundane fact that few Americans in 1963 had witnessed, even imagined, the murder of a President.

By then, in fact, the Presidency was an office exalted almost beyond mortality — by the personality and prominence of Franklin Roosevelt in Depression and war; by Truman's and Eisenhower's cold war leadership of the so-called free world, and by the President's command of nuclear weapons.

As the inheritor of that exalted place, John F. Kennedy became something like a young American emperor: it could hardly be imagined by a fascinated public that he or any President was vulnerable to a human hand. But he was — a nearly unbelievable fact that spawned dozens of conspiracy theories for a people unable to accept the idea that a deed so momentous did not have equally momentous origins.

The assassination in Dallas, moreover, marked the real arrival of television, history's mightiest conveyor of unforgettable images and moments. Only that autumn, the two major networks, still relatively primitive, had inaugurated 30-minute evening news broadcasts (with John Kennedy the guest star on each program). But from the moment the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza through the funeral services three days later, the networks stayed continuously on the air, steadily focused on the searing drama — bringing the nation

together, as perhaps never before, in its time of shock and grief. Television, blazoning the events of that weekend on the memories of most Americans then living, became the national nervous system.

Kennedy, then in his third year of office, was believed by many to be growing in stature, moving toward a higher statesmanship, an impression since cultivated in the numerous memoirs of his associates. The limited test-ban treaty, concluded

It is the man and his myth, not his record, that resist memory's eraser.

only weeks before the fatal shots were fired, seemed ample evidence. So more than a few Americans believe today, some passionately, that a President growing in office would not have taken the nation so deeply into Vietnam as his successor did.

Nor does Vietnam provide the only such wishful idea. Even if Nov. 22, 1963, is taken only as a benchmark in time and what followed a coincidence, it was not long thereafter that things began to go wrong for Americans. The nation's youth began to drop out and turn on, the war in Vietnam became an endless nightmare, cities burned in the "long hot summers" of black revolt, Robert Kennedy and

Martin Luther King fell before other assassins, world economic supremacy trickled away, crime turned cities into huddles of fear, Watergate destroyed a President and faith in Presidents, hostages and burning helicopters in Iran shattered illusions of American might.

Ironically, all that enhanced the Kennedy legend. Many Americans believed, on faith rather than evidence, that if John Kennedy had not been cut down as he was coming into his prime, if Bobby Kennedy had been there to follow him, these disasters could somehow have been avoided. The worse things seemed to become, the more such Americans missed something they identified with the Kennedy brothers, if in belief rather than fact.

John Kennedy had declared in his inaugural address that "a new generation of Americans, born in this century" had come to power with him. After the stolid years of the 50's and the Eisenhower Administration, the change seemed welcome to that "new generation"; and a third of a century later, in a time of political revulsion, many graying oldsters still mourn a lost leader and the idea of a new age that never came. They will never know if it ever would have.

His most dedicated opponents, moreover, conceded that Kennedy was an engaging man — not the least of his political assets. His Presidential news conferences were the first to be televised live and regularly, and for millions of viewers they established — often by the alchemy of "news management" — his articulateness, his wit, his sophistication, his apparent mastery of the details of government and diplomacy. No President ever

had had the exposure in action that television gave him, and to Americans he became more familiar and recognizable, as have all Presidents since, than the local mayor or Congressman.

Finally, as idolaters often overstate, detractors frequently underrate the Kennedy record in office. It was by no means negligible. He broke, for instance, the centuries-old taboo against a Roman Catholic President, exposing other taboos to the light of reason. He became the first President to call the struggle of American blacks for full equality "a moral issue" — brave words at the time, earning him a special place in the respect and affection of black Americans.

And though Kennedy's cold warrior inaugural address is more widely quoted, his most memorable words came in the last months of his life, in his speech on June 10, 1963, at American University. He called on the nation, in what was then a risky and challenging change from years of hostility, to re-examine its attitude toward the Soviet Union.

"In the final analysis," he declared, "our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

So we all are, as was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Despite the imperial trappings of the Presidency and his own glittering aura, he knew that well enough. But in the soul-shaking years since his death, as between disillusionment and legend, Americans have chosen legend — as if to hold in memory their own sense of themselves and their country as they most wished them to be, as they used to believe they were.